

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



News Release

Great Lakes - Big Rivers Region External Affairs Office

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For Immediate Release

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Three Midwestern Mussels Included in Latest List of Candidates for Federal Endangered and Threatened Species List

Their names – the sheepnose, rayed bean, and spectaclecase -- describe their appearance, but not their precarious hold on existence. Three freshwater mussels found in waters of the Midwest are among 26 species named by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as new candidates for the federal list of endangered and threatened species. The three mussels are believed to be declining significantly throughout their range.

Candidate species are plants and animals the Service believes meet the criteria for listing under the Endangered Species Act but have not been proposed as endangered or threatened. Candidates are not protected by the Act, but they often become the focus of conservation efforts of resource managers and other partners to address the threats they face.

Candidate species receive a listing priority number from 1 to 12 based on the magnitude and imminence of threats to their continued existence. Those species facing the highest threats are at the top of the list to be designated endangered or threatened. Before a candidate can be listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Service must review all available information, publish a proposal to list it as endangered or threatened, and obtain and review public comment on the proposal. These mussels have fairly high listing priority numbers; the sheepnose and rayed bean have been given a listing priority of 2, and the spectaclecase a 4.

Each of the three candidate mussels is found in rivers and streams in the Midwest, and one – the rayed bean – is also found in one lake. Populations of these mussels have declined throughout their range and now occupy only a small fraction of their historic distribution.

The sheepnose has been wiped out throughout much of its former range or reduced to isolated populations. It now occupies only one third of the waterways where it was once found. The rayed bean once inhabited 106 bodies of water and is now known in 22 streams and one lake. The spectaclecase, once known from 45 streams in 15 states, is now found in 20 streams in 10 states. Of those streams, seven are represented by single individuals and may not support viable populations.

The declines of these mussels are primarily the result of habitat loss and degradation. Chief among the causes of decline are impoundment of waterways, destruction of the natural structure and dynamics of streams (channelization), chemical contaminants, mining, and sedimentation. Threats also come from non-native zebra mussels, small population sizes and isolation of populations.

“These little animals are silent sentinels, because they tell us when their environment – and our water sources – have problems,” said Robyn Thorson, Midwest Regional Director with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “They cannot

move away from the threats they face, and when they decline, we know we should pay attention.”

Freshwater mussels play important roles in their ecosystems. As they filter water for food, they remove impurities. Mussels are also a food source for many animals such as raccoons, herons, otters and egrets.

More information on these and other candidates and listed species can be found at the Service’s Midwest website at <http://midwest.fws.gov/endangered>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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